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Cracking the Crinoline Sian Stevenson

Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company is a well-established company that offers workshop and performance opportunities for older women. Participants (most of whom have never experienced any training in dance or theatre) have the opportunity to try out new dance-theatre based skills and make high quality performance projects alongside professional artists. Celebrating life-long creativity, the company challenges views of being an 'old' woman, and offers older women a presence in the world of performance where they are rarely offered the opportunity to participate, let alone be valued and applauded. Our work considers the funny side of things, the stuff of life, and, in order to reach as diverse an audience as possible, we often perform in public spaces, such as the streets.

Our in-house company, *MovingMemory* is a company of women aged between 52 and 82, who have been working and performing together for the last five years. They are inspired to make work that makes the public question and look again, especially in relation to what we consider 'old', what it means to be creative, and what it means to be 'beautiful'. Very often the work is inspired by the stories the women bring with them, or their views and experiences of the world. Like the women, the content is gutsy, witty, full of passion, and because it is grounded in an authenticity, the performers are connected to the material in a way that allows audiences to relate on a very human level. This company want to dance, not for the sake of it, but in order to say something, and this is exactly what *Cracking the Crinoline* did.

The inspiration for *Cracking the Crinoline* grew from the image of the 'sanitary bag lady' as we call her, alongside queen bees, and our heroes, the Suffragettes. We wanted to subvert stereotypes, celebrate the strength and power of older women, and make a statement that made it very clear that older women have something important to add to our society. As opposed to being on the disposal heap, in 'god's waiting room', or dried up old crones, we created a piece that celebrated the performers as they are now, very much alive, sexy, and stomping. The piece focused on cracking the surface, looking beneath the obvious, exemplified by transformations within the piece, from little old lady to warrior, enhanced by change of costume, music, and style of movement. Musically the piece moves from Gracie Fields' *Little Old Lady*, to angry techno beat music overlaid with voices of the company, distorted into dark and scary echoes. The performers morph from passive and meek 'lavender ladies' to a dangerous and dominant community expressing war-like intentions in the final section of the piece, *The Moving Memory Haka*.

Having enjoyed performing a flashmob-style dance in Canterbury with children from a local school, and wanting to perform to audiences that don't regularly go to the theatre, this 'pop up' guerilla-style performance delivered its sting to many different communities across the south east. Our 'unusual' spaces included a sports centre in Gillingham, a market square in Faversham, a plaza in Canterbury, a park in Hythe, Dreamland Leisure park and Turner Contemporary Arts Centre, Margate (Tribes Festival). The piece also travelled to traditional spaces such as Sadler's Wells London and the Brighton Dome, but it was in public spaces, where people had little sense that such an event was to take place, that the piece, and our learning, really developed. If people have witnessed 'street theatre' before, the

performers they will have seen are, more often than not, young, so for many of our audience, the surprise and delight of viewing old women behaving badly in crinolines, boxing boots and marigolds, was clear. The response of the audience was enhanced by the structure of the piece; once the audience had accepted that, yes, these were old women putting themselves centre stage (and taking a great risk in doing so), the audience settled into the security and enjoyment of witnessing proper old lady activity; gentle Victorian biddies on their way to church of a Sunday morning, politely curtsying to all they met. However, as the music warped, the audience was presented with an alien-like transformation, a shedding of the familiar clothing of the 'old woman', a stripping of shawls, bonnets and silk handbags (which were threateningly tossed toward the audience), crinolines and bonnets turned inside out to reveal the sleek silhouette of this swarm of queen bees, topped by yellow marigolds, suggestive of hard graft and the surgical. Via their gaze, the women confronted and provoked all to bear witness to the strength of the female, and threatened to buzz down anyone who stood in the way of their world dominating quest. The women were powerful and sexy, and beautiful.

The delight of older women in the audience was tangible. By proxy, they were validated and made visible. Wherever possible, the company invited the audience to join them in the Haka causing much hilarity and a real sense of a shared mission. In Margate we worked with a found group of 'Baby Bees' extending the choreography to include this new community. They performed alongside the *MovingMemory Company* at the Turner Contemporary in Margate, swelling the audience with friends and family, who beamed with pride as they saw their loved ones perform with exuberance.

All of the performances demanded that the women negotiate the unpredictable happenings that can occur when making a spectacle of yourself in public spaces, and yes, every performance went wrong and right. As the outside eye, and the 'safe-guarder' of these precious women, my eye constantly saw the pending terrors of the cracked paving slab, the drunk man meandering dangerously toward the company, or worst of all, a Val or Jane or Wendy just about to trip on their crinoline, falling and breaking a limb (as had happened in rehearsal). Amazingly, none of these fears were realised, the women developing a professionalism that allowed them to juggle and adapt to any difficulties the performances threw at them.

One of my key concerns since starting the company, alongside the issue of funding, has been to convince venues to take the work. Expectations of old women dancing are low. People assume sweetness, soft shmuck, feeble audiences and performances unworthy of critical acclaim. What *Cracking the Crinoline* did was prove that a company of older women are powerful, moving and so, so worthy of a trip out. Venues and festivals have realised that old women can be vital and thrilling, and that there's a lot of older people out there who want to see themselves represented in performance. We were surprised by the impact of the piece, moved by the response, and learnt that working in public spaces threw up the possibility of special moments of intimacy that resulted from being up close with the public. This has been empowering for the individual performers, the depth of relationships between company members, development of performance skills, confidence in our ability to work difficult spaces, and empowerment for us and, I believe, our audiences, confirmed by comments such as "thrilling", "delightful and strangely moving", "inspirational."

Sian Stevenson is a Director, Choreographer, Lecturer (University of Kent Drama and Theatre Department), and Artistic Director of Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company.

www.movingmemorydance.com